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# The Year of the Spy (in a Manner of Speaking)

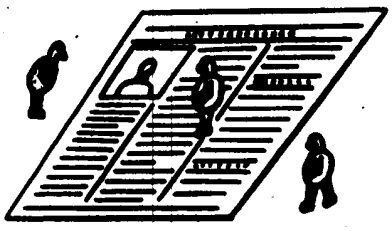
By John Kenneth Galbraith

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — The year just past will, perhaps fortunately, have no great claim on history. Partly in consequence it will be remembered, at least slightly, as the year of the spy, more especially as the year of the recidivist spy.

As a onetime ambassador and even more anciently as a participant in the sharp postwar discussions about whether the wartime intelligence activities of the Office of Strategic Services should be continued (the State Department, where I was serving, being bureaucratically opposed), I have a nostalgic acquaintance with the subject and have had also a considerable continuing interest in it.

My present thoughts on the matter were stimulated by a minor incident in the city of Madras in July 1961. I was then visiting our consulate and Dr. Thomas W. Simons, our consul general, a most learned and diligent public servant. Knowing everyone in that part of India, he gathered them all for the occasion, and Dr. Simons' reception line stretched for some hundreds of yards into the invisible distance. The tedium was relieved, however, when a tall, well-proportioned and visibly exuberant man arrived to pump my hand in warm friendship and to say in a notably vigorous voice: "Mr. Ambassador, I am the superintendent of police here in Madras. I would like to tell you that I have the most satisfactory relationship with your spies." The surrounding audience reacted with interest.

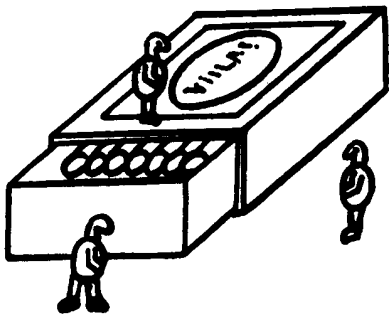
Returning to the matter next day, I encountered some indignation. The functions of two Central Intelligence Agency officers attached to the consular staff had been made known to the Indian authorities, who, in any case, could have learned of their assignment in those days from a few minutes' knowledgeable study of past postings in the "Foreign Service Register."



I could not but feel how much better it was that they had become so known rather than rudely, even explosively, discovered by the Indians. Their indignation was over the reference to spies. "Other countries have spies," I was told, "Americans have intelligence specialists." An interesting distinction, I thought, and, reading the papers in these last months, one sees that it is a difference on which we still insist. Foreign spies invite our grave indignation; the work of our intelligence personnel we rightly applaud.

Exploring these matters further during my term in New Delhi, I learned that almost no information of any kind was uncovered by our intelligence operatives that wouldn't have come to us in the ordinary course of events. More important, there was no information whatever that we really needed to have from that distant provincial city. What was gathered went on to Washington to be read only by individuals who, having no other responsibilities, read what no one of importance had time to read — an example of what my fellow economists call disguised unemployment.

I then pursued these matters yet further to consider our intelligence reporting on developments of which we might wish to be aware. It led me to formulate for circulation at the time what I hoped would thereafter be called Galbraith's First Law of Intelligence. It was that you cannot tell anything useful about the intentions of a government that doesn't know itself. This is the normal situation. As a broad rule, debate and the resolution of power conflicts on all great decisions continue up to the moment of final decision. So it is with other governments; so it is with ours. Generally speaking, it is better to have no firm belief about what will be done — to have what is greatly praised as an open mind — than to be frozen to a view of what, ultimately, will not happen.



Emerging also from my study was an awareness of the disconcerting shortage of secrets. This was true in the United States. "In this Government," President John F. Kennedy observed in those days, "there are no secrets except a few things I need to know." So it was in other regimes, and so, I am sure, it remains. I do not overstate: In all my years in Government, I never learned anything of great operative importance from intelligence sources that I didn't already know or wouldn't have learned well before need.

The foregoing leads on to a truly remarkable feature of our intelligence operations, which is that nearly uniquely among Government activities — the Pentagon is a partial exception — those involved do not have to answer as to cost, and certainly not in any public way.

A few weeks ago, our intelligence-cum-espionage operations ran into difficulty in Ghana; our operative there had to be retrieved. No one asked what secrets there were in Ghana of which we were in any conceivable need and what they cost. But

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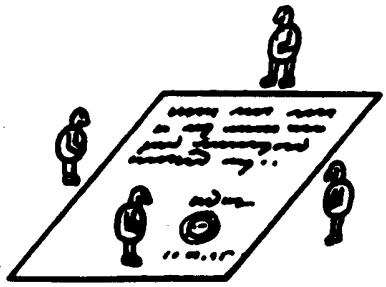
one need not go to Ghana to find the case for a cost-benefit calculation.

In these last weeks, there has been greatly enjoyed indignation at Harvard over a suitably reticent C.I.A. subsidy to a conference on the Middle



East and likewise to a book on Saudi Arabia by one of my colleagues that was published by the Harvard University Press. Dubious matters, certainly. But no one at all asked one of the most compelling of questions: Why in the world was the C.I.A. dispensing public funds in this way — paying for knowledge that any competent operative could better get by talking with experts or reading in a library, and all of it free?

Why, in particular, was there no calculation of the value of this operation against the damage from its becoming known — as in all certainty it would? It is a calculation that one is also led to recommend to the Israelis and for that heavy work in Ghana — indeed, for all intelligence and covert operations. It was the small genius of those operatives in Madras that they had made themselves known to the Indian police.

The only form of discriminatory comment, racism of sorts, that is allowed these days is against bureaucrats. From this our intelligence operatives are wonderfully exempt. They are also the only public servants who are consistently celebrated in our lesser literature — spy novels as, regrettably, they are called. I have no hope, accordingly, that this profession is in for any very serious restraint.

Like others, and if for no other reason than because I support arms control, I concede the need to know what the Russians are doing. Given our current all-but-theological commitment to market incentives, I also fear that we will see even more purchase and vending of intelligence knowledge and personnel, with the associated publicity and condemnation.

I would urge, as a broad rule, however, that we make our spies known to friendly governments; they will usually be so known anyway, and a certain amount of embarrassing publicity will thus be avoided.

Let us also, with whatever difficulty, develop a concept of useless information and contemplate, however casually, the cost of its collection.

And, finally, let us recognize that, as regards a large area of government intention, we cannot know because those involved do not know and it is better to accept ignorance than to be committed to error. □

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